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Notes on the Current Situation in East Timor

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In spite of the fact that East Timor continues to be sealed off from the outside world, with access to the territory being granted only to a small and carefully selected group of foreigners, there has been a steady trickle of information from the former Portuguese Province. Brief reports have been obtained from letters smuggled out of East Timor, while other assessments have been provided by Indonesian and Pro-Indonesian sources, some of whom have intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground in Timor. On the basis of this information it is possible to construct a somewhat clearer picture of the general pattern of events in the territory over the past 2 years, in spite of the paucity of reliable information from official Indonesian sources.

Despite the steady flow of reports, many of them contradictory, from official Indonesian sources in Jakarta that the Fretilin military opposition had been reduced to a few hundred poorly equipped troops, the military resistance to Indonesia's invasion of East Timor continued to be effective until June-July 1978. The persistent Fretilin claims that their forces controlled more than 80% of "the national soil" seemed exaggerated, but as late as mid 1977, more than 18 months after the Indonesian invasion, western intelligence sources were reported to have concluded that no more than one third of East Timor was under the effective control of Indonesian forces. As late as June 1978, on the eve of Indonesia's last and most effective military onslaught, Fretilin messages reported fierce fighting near important coastal centres and at the village of Remexio, less than 15 kilometres from Dili itself.

During the past 18 months the Indonesian armed forces launched two main offensives against Fretilin forces. The first, which commenced in September 1977, was clearly designed to coincide with President Suharto's much publicised offer of an amnesty to Fretilin troops and their followers who were prepared to surrender. The military operation, which according to reports involved the injection of an additional 15,000 troops into the

Timor campaign, was given no publicity whatever by Indonesian authorities. Its existence appears to have been leaked to the Australian Press from local Defence Department sources, but it was also credibly reported by Fretilin.

According to Fretilin radio reports, and from messages and letters from Timorese and catholic priests living in the occupied parts of East Timor, this operation swung into action in early September. The intensified operations of the ground forces were accompanied by air attacks on the Timorese in the interior, and from time to time by naval bombardment from Indonesian warships. Bitter fighting was reported to be taking place between Indonesian forces and Fretilin troops in many parts of the territory, with heavy loss of life on both sides. Fretilin messages picked up at Darwin claimed that 2,000 Indonesian troops were killed in the last two months of the year, but that the Pro-Independence forces were holding their ground. Messages from non-Fretilin sources in Dili gave some inkling of the full horror of the campaign. A priest wrote: "After September the war was intensified. Military aircraft were in action all day long. Hundreds of human beings die daily, and their bodies are left as food for the vultures. If bullets don't kill us we died from epidemic disease; villages are completely destroyed. The war is entering its third year and no end is in site. The barbarities (understandable in the stone age), the cruelties, the looting, the shooting of people without any justification, are now part of every day life in Timor. Total insecurity and the terror of being arrested is our daily bread". "... Fretilin troops who surrender are disposed of. For them there is no prison ..."

Another interesting account of the fighting at that particular time came from the pen of a French journalist, Denis Riechle of the journal, Paris Match, who reported that the Indonesians were "systematically wiping out" the population of villages known to be, or suspected of being, Fretilin supporters. He also claimed that the Indonesians had just strengthened their "20,000-strong East Timor army with an extra 10,000 men".

A letter from a resident of Dili, which surfaced in Canberra in February 1978, also vividly alluded to the war situation. According to the letter "a continuously-increasing violent war rages in Timor. The group of villages in which I lived has been completely destroyed. There is not one soul there. ... One sees noone else but Indonesian soldiers and Chinese on the streets of Dili; there are very few Timorese for the majority is either in the forest, dead or in jail. The luck of Timor is to be born in tears, to live in tears, and to die in tears."

In May 1978, after something of a lull in the fighting, Indonesia apparently threw in 10,000 to 15,000 more troops into the fighting in East Timor as part of operation "Skylight" the aim of which appears to have been to destroy the offensive capability of Fretilin before the visit of President Suharto in the following July. A reading of Fretilin messages sent via Darwin, as well as reports from sources in Jakarta, indicate that the new offensive led to a steady weakening of Fretilin's military position over the ensuing 6 months. However, it was not until after the middle of the year that Fretilin troops were forced out of some of their positions quite near Dili, such as at Remexio and Railaco. Clearly, 1978 was a critical year for Fretilin and its military strength was steadily eroded away. In the face of the continuing isolation of the forces of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, the starvation and disease caused by war and particularly by Indonesian air attacks on the rich food-producing mountain valleys, the morale of the resistance appears to have weakened. The first sign of divisions within Fretilin appeared in 1977 when Xavier do Amaral was deposed from his position as President, apparently for having sought to initiate negotiations with Indonesians. The second fracture manifested itself little over a year later when Alarico Fernandes announced that he and some other Timorese had broken away from the Fretilin Central Committee. --It has been alleged that Fernandes and his followers "sold out" to the Indonesians, but the circumstances under which he was captured by, or defected to, the Indonesians are by no means clear. Nevertheless, according to information from a sensitively placed Timorese

source, by the end of 1978, the Fretilin military resistance was virtually a spent force. The decline in the fortunes of Fretilin culminated in the killing of their President, Nicolau Lobato, on the morning of 31 December 1978. According to press reports from Jakarta about 20 Fretilin leaders and troops were killed with Lobato, and another 12 or so captured. In spite of the fact that for some 2 years official Indonesian spokesmen had been claiming that Fretilin had been reduced to "some roving bands", the killing of Lobato was received in Jakarta with some rejoicing. The Defence Minister, General Yusuf, flew at once to Dili to inspect Nicolau's body. The corpse of the proud Timorese leader was photographed, surrounded by a number of military officers, including Brig-General Dading, the commander of the Balibo attack in October 1975. According to the Indonesian daily, "Kompas", the killing of the Timorese leader was the culmination of an operation which commenced on 11 December and involved the use of 2,500 troops who were whisked from place to place by helicopters.

The present position of the military aspect of the resistance to Indonesian occupation of East Timor is far from clear. It has been reported that the Vice President of Fretilin, Mau Lear (or Carvarinho) was killed on about 2 February. If this is so then the present leaders are probably Hamis and Vincente Reis. Although the armed resistance has probably not collapsed altogether, it is now evidently deprived of some of its principal leaders and is confined to mountainous areas in the south western sector of the territory and perhaps to one or two sectors in the centre and in the east. Some of the most skilled military leaders of Fretilin, among them Achilles and Hermanogilde Alves, have either been killed or captured. Recent reports from non-Fretilin sources in Jakarta suggest that, although a number of the Fretilin leaders are in jail or under house arrest in Dili (among them Alarico Fernandes), many of the ordinary soldiers were shot after their capture. It is not clear what the Indonesians intend to do with the Fretilin leaders. Xavier is now said to be in Dili. According to a recent report he is very thin (33 kilos) and ill, but his experience as a prisoner of his former Fretilin comrades could conceivably be as much responsible for his condition as the treatment he has received at the hands of the Indonesians.

The Fretilin split and the military decline of the independence movement after 3 years of bitter fighting against overwhelming odds, both in terms of numbers and equipment, is hardly a matter of surprise. Fretilin always had both conservative and radical elements among its leadership, whose views would not have been easy to reconcile, but the main issues dividing the leaders, after 2 years of bitter fighting, was probably whether the human cost of the struggle justified its continuation in the isolated circumstances of East Timor. In the face of declining international interest in the war in East Timor, and diminishing moral support for their struggle, the future of the campaign must have seemed hopeless. In terms of experience in guerilla fighting, and in the will to fight itself, Fretilin troops were undoubtedly more than a match for the Indonesian forces they were up against, but, as the Indonesian troops gained in combat experience, and Fretilin losses mounted, the future must have appeared bleak. A major blow to the morale of Fretilin forces, and their supporters in the mountains, was the Indonesian operations against their food supplies.

Reports from East Timor suggest that the removal of Xavier affected the overall morale of the resistance. Although for some time real power in the organisation had been in the hands of Lobato and others, Xavier's charismatic appeal and widespread popularity would have been a major factor in holding together the several political factions and tribal groupings in the Timorese population within Fretilin lines. He was of course accused of all kinds of treachery when he was deposed, but these allegations may have been exaggerated in order to justify the momentous decision to dispense with his leadership. One of the main reasons for the split in Fretilin was obviously to do with whether efforts should be made to negotiate a settlement with Indonesia. According to a well placed Indonesian source there was at least one attempt by Fretilin to enter into some kind of negotiations, and a preliminary meeting is said to have taken place at Hatolia in 1976. The "negotiations" reportedly foundered when the parties could not agree on the number of troops to be present at the meeting. Curiously, the report on

this event suggests that the negotiations were initially designed to facilitate an exchange of coffee for rice. At the time Fretilin was in control of the best coffee areas of East Timor, but they were badly in need of rice. Indonesian officers, on the other hand, wanted to get hold of the coffee in order to profit from highly advantageous export arrangements they had set up in Singapore. The whole affair may have been a local initiative, because sources in Jakarta claim that at no time was the Indonesian military command prepared to negotiate other than surrender terms with Fretilin forces.

According to a series of reports from within East Timor, living conditions in Dili and a number of other towns on the north coast began to improve in 1978 and the Indonesian military administration sought to curb some of the excesses of the troops. The Indonesian Minister for Defence, General Yusuf, has taken a close interest in East Timor, which he has visited more than nine times since early in 1978. However, well-placed sources in Dili claim that Major General Benny Moerdani, the military commander of the invasion forces, continued to maintain a kind of overall responsibility for East Timor. Moerdani was said to have become antagonistic to the foreign press, particularly to the Australian media because of its "anti-Indonesian" reporting of events in East Timor. Yet he is said to be more influential with the President than ever before, although he has been shunning publicity in Jakarta. Until the second half of 1978 Brigadier General Dading Kalbuadi was territorial commander (panglima) of the East Timor military district. Dading was an early figure in the Timor campaign, having been responsible for overall command of the attack on Balibo and Maliana in October 1975, in which the five Australian newsmen were killed. According to sources in Timor he demonstrated considerable skill in arranging orchestrated receptions and guided tours for foreign diplomats and journalists.

If one accepts these accounts, it seems that most visits were so cleverly organised that the visitors usually went away feeling satisfied that the situation in East Timor was not so bad after all. According to these reports, the Timorese were forced

colonial neglect. In fact in the last years of Portuguese rule food supplies were generally adequate in all parts of East Timor although, as in the case of neighbouring Indonesian islands, famine conditions occurred from time to time in certain districts. Other experienced foreign visitors such as New Zealand diplomats from Jakarta and the Papua New Guinean foreign minister also seemed anxious not to find fault with Indonesia's performance in East Timor. Indeed the PNG foreign minister remarked that he visited Dili's "White Sands" beach to which, he claimed, the Timorese had been denied access in the time of Portuguese colonial rule, and that only whites had used it. In the first place, many of the Portuguese officials, including some of the senior officials, were coloured people, some of them from Timor. Secondly, even in the early 60's, when the Portuguese colonial system was much tougher than in the early seventies, Timorese had freely used this beach. Whatever their shortcomings, the Portuguese as a general rule did not practice any form of racial discrimination.

Thus, as one Indonesian put it privately, most foreign visitors to Timor did not seem interested in probing the situation beyond the dubious facts presented to them. In short, most of the visitors to East Timor were less anxious to ascertain the facts of the situation than to find a way of letting Indonesia off the hook in relation to the allegations that serious violations of human rights had been perpetrated. On those few occasions when they encountered criticism the Indonesians obviously did not like it. According to a sensitively placed source, when a visiting Australian official told General Dading that it was his impression that Indonesia controlled one third, Fretilin another third, and that the rest was a no-mans land, the General was furious. He was reportedly also angry and embarrassed when Richard Carlton reported frankly on his findings during his 6 day visit to East Timor in mid 1977. On the other hand, the Indonesian authorities were generally very successful in their handling of such visits, and such embarrassing experiences were rare. But then the Indonesians seldom took risks in their selection of visitors. The only journalist who seem to have been given any free rein were those

to participate in welcoming demonstrations, their cooperation assured by the presence of large numbers of Indonesian troops in Timorese dress in their midst. Whenever visitors came troops were moved away from the areas to be visited, in order to make the Indonesian military presence less visible (sometimes they were in the bush ensuring that Fretilin did not get access to the visitors). Other special arrangements were also undertaken.

According to one of these accounts, on the day before Congresswoman Meynor and her party visited Dili in 1977, Indonesian troops and officials moved large amounts of Red Cross clothing, bedding and furniture into a women's refugee establishment to be visited by Mrs Meynor. However, it was reported that the Indonesians seized back all of this material as soon as the visit was over. Another report described how Indonesian military aircraft had shot up Fretilin positions and suspected pro-Fretilin villages ahead of an aerial inspection of certain parts of East Timor by two Australians in May 1977. An interesting example of a successful Indonesian public relations operation was the visit to East Timor by a number of Ambassadors last year. The Ambassadors visited Remexio and saw some of the Timorese who had come down from the mountains. Their remarks to the press, however, suggested that their assessments were heavily influenced by the Indonesian presentation of the situation. Few of those who commented on the refugee situation in East Timor seemed to comprehend that the appalling physical condition of the refugees was due not to ill-treatment by Fretilin, but to the fact that several hundred thousand Timorese had fled to the mountains in the face of the brutal treatment meted out on the local population by Indonesian troops. They had had few medical supplies and no doctors to treat the thousands of casualties resulting from Indonesian bombing and military actions. Another obvious reason for their poor physical condition would have been the fact that for more than a year Indonesian forces had been destroying the crops in the mountain valleys which had been the only source of food available to these people.

Some of the visitors seemed to believe that the Timorese always looked that way, and that their poor physical condition largely reflected their cultural backwardness and Portuguese

who had consistently reported in favour of "integration". Also diplomatic visitors invariably came from those countries that had supported Indonesia's Timor operation, or had "come to terms" with the annexation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that their reports generally contrasted with those from Timorese or Church sources, who consistently presented a bleak picture of the situation in East Timor. As recently as the end of last year an Indonesian official privately admitted that it was true that more than 100,000 people had died in the territory because of the war. He went on to say that hundreds of villages had been "wiped off the face of the earth" in the bombing. Many names of the map of East Timor no longer existed, he said. On the basis of many reports of this nature, there can no longer be any doubt about the bloody and brutal nature of Indonesia's seizure of the former Portuguese colony.

Information on the present situation is scarce, but recent travellers report that life in Dili and Baucau, the two main towns, has now more or less returned to somewhere near normal. Experienced observers report that the roads between these two towns and some of the other larger towns are now more or less safe to travel on, although ambushes still occur. A fairly recent description came from some Timorese who left late last year and managed to escape to Portugal. They reported that military aircraft were still carrying out bombing missions in the interior, but that not all of the aircraft were operating from Dili. An Indonesian official also reported that at the end of last year military aircraft were operating against Fretilin from near Kupang. These sources reported that the main hospital in Dili was still closed to the public, and that it was being used for the treatment of military casualties. Townspeople were being treated at a small former maternity centre, located in the town itself. They reported that there were lots of prisoners held by Indonesians in the Sang Tai Ho warehouse behind the Tropical hotel, but that recently some had been released. These refugees made some interesting comments on the situation of the Chinese.

They said that the Chinese schools were no longer functioning and that the Indonesians were demanding that the Chinese speak Bahasa Indonesia. Chinese were no longer enjoying the privileges that they had had before, and, in any case, there was not much economic activity. Although looting had been reduced, from time to time soldiers entered shops and robbed at pistol point. The Chinese shopkeepers had raised the prices of most goods because Indonesians frequently demanded that if the prices weren't lowered the shopkeepers would be beaten. In order to preserve their profit margins some of the Chinese, according to this account, had doubled their prices. The Timorese also reported that Dili was now equipped with traffic lights and that colour television could be picked up by the very few who could manage to afford a colour television set.

With the armed resistance now at a much less effective level, many of the Timorese seem to be coming to terms with a situation to which there must seem to be no real alternative. There are some signs however that many of the Timorese leaders in the Provincial Government would not hesitate to organise a secession from Indonesia if an opportunity were to present itself. There have also been a couple of reports of private talks between prominent west and east Timorese about the prospect of establishing a Republic of Timor at sometime in the future. As far as one can gather, the west Timorese played little part in the war against East Timor, and were appalled at the inhumanity and indiscipline of the detested Javanese. Therefore, even if Fretilin were to disappear as an effective resistance force, another armed insurrection could not be ruled out in the future. The horrific experiences of the past 3 years have undoubtedly left many deep scars and a deep hatred of most Indonesians by the majority of the educated Timorese and the Chinese, passions which even a somewhat more enlightened style of administration in East Timor is unlikely to be able to eradicate.